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### Robert Zaretsky, Boswell's Enlightenment, The Belknap Press

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Robert Zaretsky, *Boswell's Enlightenment*, The Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA, 2015.

The Scot James Boswell is known chiefly as Samuel Johnson's biographer, but he also wrote a series of journals, which offer a revealing account of much of his adult life. These journals were Boswell's attempt at studying and understanding himself. By doing so, he hoped to acquire the self-knowledge necessary to cultivate a firm and stable character, though the achievement of that goal eluded him throughout his life.

Zaretsky's book is an elegant account of Boswell's relations with a variety of people who were all, in some respect, important in his constant struggle for self-improvement. He met them when he was completing his education and travelling, first to London and then on the European Continent. These figures included the philosopher, jurist and cultural patron Lord Kames in Edinburgh, with whose daughter, as with so many other women, Boswell had an affair; Adam Smith in Glasgow, who taught Boswell at the University there; David Hume, whose scepticism about the afterlife Boswell found fascinating; and Samuel Johnson, whom Boswell first met in London, where he had gone in the futile hope of winning a commission in the King's Guards. 'Belle de Zuylen' (better known as an author of epistolary novels under her married name of Isabelle de Charrière), Rousseau, Voltaire, the radical politician John Wilkes, and the Corsican patriot Pasquale Paoli were others with whom Boswell struck up personal and sometimes close relationships, and who make an appearance in Zaretsky's story.

These relationships were not only important for Boswell's emotional and intellectual development. According to Zaretsky, they also had a broader significance, because they were the means by which Boswell confronted some of the central intellectual debates of the Enlightenment. The question he kept returning to in particular was the immortality of the soul. Some of his interlocutors, such as Hume or Wilkes, were sceptical or even dismissive about the afterlife; others, like Samuel Johnson, defended their belief in it. Boswell's own outlook had been formed by his deeply pious mother, Euphemia, whose gloomy Calvinism Boswell found impossible to shake off throughout his life. His tendency towards 'melancholy' or 'hypochondria' was deepened by feelings of guilt over his many casual romantic and sexual liaisons. But his anxiety, Zaretsky argues, was also an expression of a wider conflict in the eighteenth century between the competing intellectual principles of 'Dare to Know' and the 'great reefs of faith and religion' (p. 9). As Zaretsky suggests, Boswell's responses to figures as diverse as Wilkes and Johnson, Kames and Paoli, Voltaire and Rousseau, are a way of understanding and illustrating this wider conflict, which was central to Enlightenment thought.

Zaretsky's account is lucid and engaging, but his interpretation of the Enlightenment implies a clear opposition between religion and intellectual inquiry in the eighteenth century. Yet that view of the Enlightenment as a struggle between truth and religion seems a trifle schematic. Many people were critical of certain forms of intellectual inquiry on religious grounds. But it is very difficult to find anyone, who

condemned all intellectual inquiry on the grounds that it was bad for religion. Boswell's anxiety and emotional crises probably did not stem from truth-seeking in general, but from his failure to live up to the standards of personal conduct expected by others, his father in particular. Intellectually, he was most concerned with finding the means of becoming more *retenu* and developing a constant and well-regulated character that practiced a respectable kind of sociability, rather than indulging in the 'rattling' talk and sexual escapades he was prone to. Although Boswell was in some sense seeking truth, his anxieties were about far more than the pressures of secularisation. In general, the relationship of religion to Enlightenment thought is now widely thought to be less clear-cut than Zaretsky appears to be suggesting.

'Religion' also came in many varieties. Their differences mattered greatly, yet these receive very little attention in this book. The Calvinism of Boswell's mother Euphemia, for example, was quite distinct from the beliefs of Samuel Johnson or those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Although there is a section on the Moderate Presbyterian minister Hugh Blair, it does not draw directly on Blair's own writings, but on quotations from a secondary article. In general, Zaretsky has a tendency sometimes to rely a little heavily on other scholars' discussions of primary texts rather than his own readings of them when making his arguments.

There are a few inaccuracies, though they are very minor. There were no kingdoms in the Holy Roman Empire (p. 130). Brunswick certainly was not a kingdom (p. 132). The Seven Years War was not launched by Frederick the Great 'soon after coming to power' (p. 142). Overall, Zaretsky's book is a stimulating, lively, and interesting account, though its broader claims are perhaps debatable.

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